Dont Have to Pave Paradise to Ruin It

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Body

AS A BIOLOGIST, THE CREATION STORY and the concept of the Garden of Eden have always held great fascination for me. "And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good." The perfect balance inherent in the workings of the natural world I hold sacred. With all due respect to strict constructionists, I believe the processes of evolution are the mechanisms shaping that perfection. Things don't start going awry until Adam and Eve enter the picture. Too arrogant to leave well enough alone, the human species screw around with the system and paradise is lost. Now that's an ecological allegory!

Here on the Island, tales of a Vineyard primeval are part of our oral tradition. In that Island Eden, great whales, swordfish and cod "the waters brought forth abundantly" Our ponds once runneth over with scallops and oysters. Alewives annually came forth and multiplied. Fowl filled the firmament and "every creeping thing that creepeth" was abundant. To quote the Almighty, "it was very good."

So when was our Island paradise lost? When the great whales first disappeared? When the last heath hen died? When swordfish became scarce? When codfish failed to multiply? When alewives failed to come forth to spawn? When the human population doubled? Or when "every creeping thing that creepeth" became less abundant? All of the above is the correct answer. It's a continuum, and sadly, it continues.

The really scary thing about this decline is the speed with which it is happening. I arrived on the Vineyard in 1976 and I am witness to much of our fall from biological grace. We are destroying the creation at a much faster pace than the six biblical days it took to create.

"We are as gods and might as well get good at it." Stewart Brand began each of his Whole Earth Catalogs with this profound statement. I'm not sure if he had the creation story in mind when he wrote it, but clearly the human species, for good or evil, does possess awesome powers to change its environment. Human impacts on the planet now vie with natural processes to such a degree that there is a proposal to formally rename the current geologic epoch the Anthropocene. For better or worse, we have "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth." To date, we have been doing a pretty lousy job of it. The evidence for human-induced climate change is overwhelming and the predicted impacts from increasing greenhouse gas emissions are dire. Our technology has taken us far from our

biological roots. Like the Genesis story, there is no going back to the original Eden. However, our power to reverse the destruction is just as awesome as our power to destroy. Just maybe if we "get good at" understanding, protecting and mimicking the perfect balance of the natural systems that still surround us, there is hope.

Bioremediation is the use of biological agents, such as plants or shellfish, to remove or neutralize contaminants, as in polluted soil or water. This year the Martha's Vineyard Shellfish Group investigated several methods to mitigate the nitrogen overloads polluting our ponds, including experimental oyster reefs, the harvest of phragmites reeds, floating islands and "living shorelines." In addition, we produced millions of seed shellfish and we think that is very good. I like to think our shellfish are included in the "creeping things that creepeth" category! We understand our mission and are trying our best "to get good at it." Your tax deductible donation will help us in that quest. Thank you and Bivalvify!

Richard Karney is shellfish biologist and director of the Martha's Vineyard Shellfish Group.

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